

Small Mercies: A Boy After War

by: Ernest Hillen

This incident takes place at the end of the Second World War. Ernest Hillen and his family have just been released from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp on the island of Java in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). Conditions in the camp were brutal, and among those who did not survive was Hubie, Ernest's best friend. Now the Hillens have emigrated to Canada, and Ernest must begin to adjust to life in peacetime.

The first day of school, the third in Toronto, was amazing. My mother, but especially my father, had endlessly insisted—starting the first day out of camp!—on how important, how necessary school was. I'd have to work hard, yes, to "catch up," but it would be so interesting, so enjoyable. It would be boring at best, I was certain, and probably awful; also, school was surely connected with "discipline," one of my father's favourite words. So I was nervous that morning, not happy. Find the Boys Entrance, my mother said, and then the Office: I was expected. Should she come along? Please no. A three-minute trot from Osborne Avenue, Kimberley Public School was a two-storey red-brick massive block of a building with tall wide windows and all around a fenced-in yard of crushed cinder—already filled with hundreds of running, shrieking children. I'd never seen so many together! Eyes down, I marched through them in the short-pants English-boy suit and Hubie's extra-polished riding boots—my best outfit. A man holding a bell guarded the Boys Entrance. Up the stairs and to the right I'd see the Office sign, he said. Wide wooden stairs, worn to a slope in the centre, not so clean—and then the smell hit me. A strange wonderful smell. I sucked it in. I'd discover it was made up of many different smells: ink, glue, wood, carbolic soap, wood oils, wet wool, paint, dust, fresh sweat, stale sweat, soured milk, old food, running shoes. It was the smell of school.

A woman in a long-sleeved dark-brown dress waited in the Office—tall with a large high bosom, a head full of small brown curls, brown eyes swimming huge behind rimless glasses, and a tiny mouth. She was Miss Tock, my teacher, she said smiling, and I was in grade six. She spoke very clearly in a soft voice; I would never hear her raise it. We should go to class before the bell and find me a good seat, all right?

Yep, I said.

Not speaking, we climbed more stairs, walked down an empty hard-wood-floor hall, footsteps clapping, and turned into a high-ceilinged room crowded with rows of one-piece wooden desk seats. In the back was an alcove where I had to hang up my coat. Miss Tock pointed to the second seat of the centre row that faced her desk. She turned to the blackboard behind her, wiped off other writing with her left hand, and in red chalk wrote ERNEST HILLEN with her right; her hands were as small as a girl's. I looked around me. Thirty desks at least, and the walls, and also the lower halves of the windows, jammed with drawings, paintings, cut-outs, photographs of animals and flowers, mountains and waterfalls, the largest map I'd ever seen, of Canada, and in a corner on top of a cupboard a globe—I knew about globes!—and a large grey stuffed bird. A bell rang faintly outside and then a roaring wave of shrill voices and thumps and clatter surged up stairs and bowled down halls. I stared hard at the top of my

desk; a lid- ded inkwell sat in a hole in the upper right-hand corner. Kids came stomp- ing into the room, breathing hard, flopped down with groans; not speaking, though. In a moment it grew still. I felt the eyes on me, kept my head down. The desk's surface was a blur of inked and carved doodles and of hearts, arrows, numbers, and initials.

In front of me I heard a light tapping, and I had to look up. Miss Tock stood behind her desk holding a ruler. Kids were rising around me, step- ping out of their desks to the right. I did, too. Roll-call? Bowing?

Miss Tock tapped her desk again.

"God save our gracious King," she began to sing and the class at once joined in. I knew that song. British soldiers bellowed it. The children sang as if they'd sung it many times before. I hummed along, eyes on Miss Tock. "God save the King!" it ended.

Miss Tock put the ruler on her desk, clasped her hands in front of her, lowered her head.

"Our Father who art in Heaven," she began and the class joined in. A prayer. I dropped my head, too. I was pretty sure I'd heard the prayer before, in Dutch. Was this done every day in school, singing and praying?

"Amen." The children quietly slid into their seats. Me, too. Miss Tock didn't sit down. She pointed to the blackboard and then, smiling at me, said my name. In her clear way, she said Ernest had just arrived in Canada, and he was Dutch.

I watched her little mouth.

This was Ernest's first day in school, and lucky for them he'd be in their class! Welcome Ernest!

Welcome Ernest, the class muttered.

If you were Dutch, Miss Tock said, that usually meant you came from Holland. Did anyone know where Holland was?

A hand was raised to my left. Yes? A girl stepped out of her desk. Europe, Miss Tock.

Correct.

The girl sat down.

But Ernest, Miss Tock said, did not come to Canada from Holland. He came from a country that belonged to Holland—what was called a colony— and that country was named the Dutch East Indies. Had anyone heard of the Dutch East Indies? No hands.

It was a country made up of thousands of islands, and Ernest came from the island of Java. Who had heard of Java?

No hands. I felt two light pats on my back, like a "hello." I didn't turn around. Well, said Miss Tock, Java was almost on the other side of the world and they'd learn about it later. Because of the war, she said, Ernest had missed a bit of schooling, but she thought he would fit just fine in grade six. Didn't Ernest think so, too?

Yep, I said. I still felt all those eyes, but it was interesting, talking about me. Ernest had been speaking English only for a short while, said Miss Tock, so he was still learning it. But then none of you, she said looking around the class, can speak Dutch, can you?

It was a little joke.

Was there anything she'd said so far, she asked me smiling, that I had not understood?

Nope, I said.

Learning a new language is hard work, said Miss Tock, especially if everybody around you knows only that language and you can't use your language. Does anyone here speak another language?

The hand of the boy in front of me flew up. Miss Tock nodded at him. The boy stepped out of his seat. His father knew French, Miss Tock.

Thank you.

The boy sat down.

From now on, Miss Tock said looking at me, smiling again, I could put up my hand—as I'd seen the others do—and tell her at any time if I did not understand something. Would I promise to do that?

Yep, I said, smiling back at her. Clearly Miss Tock liked me. Well, I liked her, too.

The brown eyes rested on me, patiently swimming, the small mouth went on smiling. It was very still.

Holy cow! I suddenly understood—and shot out of my desk. "Yes, Miss Tock," I said, standing straight. "Thank you, Ernest," she said. Another friendly pat on my back.

Miss Tock said the class was going to read now, and I could just sit and listen; next time I'd have my own book. Kids rummaged in their desk drawers. Mine was empty.

Miss Tock called a child's name, and he or she would read out loud standing up until Miss Tock said thank you, said another name, and then that kid would read. The bell rang. Books were tossed back inside the desks. Children rose. A hand on my shoulder turned me around: it was the patter. An open, friendly face, blue eyes, neatly combed shiny wavy blond hair the colour of Hubie's, golden.

C'mon! he said, and taking my elbow tugged me toward the door. I looked at Miss Tock, but she was talking to a girl.

It was OK, the boy said. Recess.

What, I wondered, was "recess?" Coat? I asked. Nah, said the boy. In the hallway we plunged into a river of hurrying kids, boys and girls, little ones, big ones, all talking, all making fast for the stairs; no running, though. The blond boy concentrated on slipping past those ahead, taking the stairs sometimes three at a time; I could do that.

Outside the Boys Entrance he stopped.

He was Ronald Glenesk, he said, squinting in the sudden bright daylight. What about baseball?

Yep. I said. Had I played it? Nope. Had I seen it played? Nope. Never mind, he said, c'mon! and started running to the far side of the yard; I tried to keep up. Other boys our size were hurrying in the same direction. And then I lost Ronnie and I was alone in the middle of a loudly squabbling group of about twenty. One or two slapped me on the back, another on my arm. Friendly? Were they friendly slaps? They wore long pants, jackets with zippers, running shoes, and there was I in a pale-grey short-pants suit and riding boots. Oh God—I'd have to fight! No choice. No escape. I'd known it since I woke up: new boys always had to fight. All over the world—that's how it was. I balled my fists. Leather boots at least, against running shoes. All the dim days in camp, new boys had to fight, dizzy or not dizzy, sores or no sores—the rule of the tough; my rule, too. You didn't like fighting? Too bad. Scared? Too bad. Did I still know how? God, I hadn't fought for six, seven months, not since before

Hubie . . .

Same team, Ernie! said a smiling Ronnie, suddenly beside me again. C'mon! and he jogged over to the corner of the yard's fence. Some boys quickly fanned out facing the corner; three of them busily scuffed up small mounds of cinders. Ronnie pointed to the mounds and, speaking fast, said that was First Base, that Second Base, that Third, and this was Home, where we were standing. His face was red, from running, from the cold. Someone handed him a bat. He passed it to me. I was First At Bat, he said, because I was the new guy. This was how I should grip it and swing it—and he showed me. The kid straight ahead holding the ball, he was the Pitcher. He'd throw the ball and I had to hit it and then run like hell to First Base. That was all for now. Three swings, OK?

OK.

Ronnie joined a bunch of boys to the side, leaving me alone clutching the bat, except for a kid squatting behind me. I could feel a lot of eyes.

Play ball! Play ball! voices yelled.

Small Mercies: A Boy After War 245 I watched the Pitcher. A tall boy, he first twisted his body oddly and then threw the ball—but much too fast. I swung anyway, and almost fell over.

The squatter caught it though, and tossed it back to the Pitcher.

Nice swing, Ernie! Ronnie shouted. And others did, too—Nice swing, Ernie!

The Pitcher swivelled and threw the ball. Too fast again. I swung hard, but stayed on my feet. On whose side was the Pitcher?

Way to go, Ernie! Way to go! Nice try! The squatter returned the ball. Whose side was he on? This time the Pitcher swung himself half around and threw the ball—

like a bullet. Not a ball that could be hit. Strike three! somebody called. I laid the bat down. There was then some

disagreement in Ronnie's group. Strange game: so far the only people who'd played were the Pitcher and me, and the squatter, I supposed. Everybody else, the boys fanned out in front and the ones to the side, just stood around. And then a voice from the side yelled:

"Give 'im another chance!"

Yeah! came a second voice. Another chance! from a third. Some of the boys in front of me were then shouting it, too. Weren't they the enemy? Another chance! Another chance! Give 'im another chance! In the wintry sunshine it was like a chant. Ronnie ambled over, grinning, and said I was still At Bat. I could try a few more hits. The Pitcher then didn't do his body trick, he just lobbed the ball over,

and I almost hit it. Attaboy, Ernie! Attoboy! Attoboy! Shouts and yells from all over. No question, I was getting the hang of it. The Pitcher tossed again, and I felt sure the bat touched the ball, though

the ball didn't change direction. Close one, Ernie! Close, close, close! The next ball came at me like a kiss, in the sweetest, slowest way, just reaching for the bat—and I whacked it. It rolled in a fine straight line to the Pitcher.

246

Look Back

And there was shouting! There was cheering. There was hand-clapping. The boy on First Base jumped up and down. I got the craziest feeling and clamped down my

jaws. It was just as if I was going to cry.

Nice hit, Ernie! Way to go! Attaboy! C'mon! Another one! And I did. I hit that ball several more times. The Pitcher kept throwing, I kept swinging, the squatter kept catching, and then the bell rang. Nice going! said Ronnie as we trotted back to the Boys Entrance. Inside the school I breathed in the smell. When the lunch bell rang I ran home fast. There was a lot to tell; my mother would have questions. Over Campbell's tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich in the kitchen, I reported on the thousands of kids in the yard, the smell, the noise, Miss Tock, Grade Six, the gashed desk, Ronnie, and baseball.